

2.2 **RESEARCH UPDATE: LEISURE FOR LIFE: THE ROLE OF
SCHOOLS SHOULD BE TO PROMOTE LIFELONG
RECREATIONAL SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
PARTICIPATION**

Inactive living and obesity across all age, social, ethnic and economic categories has reached epidemic proportions in the United States

Some studies say that youth sports could be one answer to the obesity epidemic. Research examining recreational sport participation among middle school students suggests a positive correlation between regular sport participation and increased physical activity (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2005).

But another study found that youth sports don't automatically cure obesity problems. Louv (2005, p.47) indicates that the increase in childhood obesity "has coincided with the greatest increase in organized sports for children in history." This finding questions the role that sports can play in addressing the youth obesity issue.

A Decline in Sports Participation

The most apparent explanation for the parallel increase in child obesity and organized youth sport opportunities may be that participation in youth sports has declined significantly during middle school years (see Hedstrom & Gould, 2004; President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport, 1997).

This decline in youth sport participation can be attributed to the fact that there are fewer options for students who are not advanced athletes (Koplan, Liverman, & Kraak, 2005). Other factors include disinterest in sports, the activity no longer being fun, problems with a coach or teacher and wanting to participate in non-sport activities (Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992).

Also, children are living further from their schools because communities are building bigger schools on the outskirts of towns, where land is cheaper (et al., 2006). Cohen et al., found that students who lived more than five miles from their school had significantly lower levels of activity. Time constraints resulting from increased commute times and bus schedules, excessive quantities of homework and environmental barriers (e.g., weather, no equipment) (Allison, Dwyer, & Makin, 1999) have all contributed to decreased participation in extracurricular activities like sports.

An increasing negative attitude toward physical activity has been another contributing factor resulting in the reduction in physical activity patterns. Although younger children have a generally positive attitude toward physical education and activity, there is strong evidence to suggest that their positive perception decreases with age (Trudeau & Shepherd, 2005). Body consciousness, especially for female adolescents and overweight children, may be another significant obstacle for participation in extra-curricular physical activity opportunities (Allison, Dwyer, & Makin, 1999; Phillips & Hill, 1998).

The Intramural

Solution

An emerging notion, which is supported by a growing body of research that examines declining physical activity patterns in youth, has led to calls for schools to introduce or reintroduce intramural programs (Koplan, Live sporting opportunities around children's motives for participating.

In examining these motivations, Seefeldt, Ewing and Walk (1992) found that "wanting to win" was rated eighth behind factors such as having fun, staying in shape, learning and improving skills, and being a part of a team. Similarly, in reviewing research conducted on motivation to participate in sports, Weiss and Ferrer-Caja (2002) found the major motivational themes to be developing physical competence, gaining social acceptance (e.g., being with friends), enhancing physical fitness and enjoying the experience.

Middle schools show a level of interscholastic sport teams of 82 percent, with high schools being even higher at 94 percent (Wechsler et al., 2000). In contrast, far fewer schools offer intramural programs. Only 49 percent of schools surveyed by the 2000 School Health Policies and Programs Study (SHPPS) offered intramural sports (Burgeson et al., 2001). The opportunities provided by inter-scholastic sports are so focused on winning and competition (Petlichkoff, 1992) that schools seem to be overlooking the reasons why children want to participate in sports.

To counteract these issues, the Committee on Prevention of Obesity in Children and Youth (Koplan, Livermore & Kraak, 2005) recommended that intramural sports be more widely introduced within schools in order to meet the needs of students with a wide range of abilities who lack time, skills or confidence to participate in inter-scholastic sports. The committee also recommended that intramural sports become a staple of both school and after-school programs.

Wechsler et al., (2000) contend that because of the lack of prestige associated with intramural sports compared to inter-scholastic sports, their potential is often overlooked. However, because their target population is focused upon children who may not have participated in much physical activity, children who may not have the skills to participate in inter-scholastic sports, or children who dislike the competitive nature of interscholastic sports (Wechsler et al., 2000), researchers and policy makers are suddenly becoming more interested in their role in addressing childhood physical inactivity

Leisure For Life

Some recent studies have found a positive association between participation in youth sports and increased physical activity in later life (e.g., Kuh & Cooper, 1992; Taylor et al., 1999; Telamo et al., 1997; van Mechelen et al., 2000). Seefeldt, Ewing and Walk (1992) found that youth sport participation correlated with a strong appreciation for fitness that carried on later in life.

However, these findings come with a caveat. Taylor et al. (1999) found that children who had negative experiences in youth sports and were "forced to exercise" were less likely to be physically active as adults. So while participation in youth sports could help prevent both youth and adult obesity it could also be seen as a detriment.

The leisure repertoire model (see Iso-Ahola, 1980; Iso-Ahola, Jackson & Dunn, 1994) theorizes that during childhood to early adulthood, individuals tend to seek new leisure experiences. After early adulthood that tendency declines. As they age, individuals tend to seek familiar leisure activities and gravitate toward familiar leisure patterns (Iso-Ahola, Jackson & Dunn, 1994). Roberts (1999) points out that individuals tend to become more conservative in their leisure patterns, sticking to past routines.

Researchers and policy-makers have begun to examine the long-term ramifications of youth involvement. Results have suggested that enjoyable participation in activities during childhood and adolescence can result in a "leisure for life" philosophy. For example, Scott and Willits (1989; 1998) found that participation in leisure activities as an adolescent was a strong predictor of involvement as an adult, even after controlling for gender, education and income.

In examining youth sport participation, Perkins et al. (2004) found that young adults were not likely to participate in sport if they had not participated in the past. Perkins et al. (2004) may have put it best when he said "sports participation during early adolescence is likely to lead to greater participation in adulthood, underscoring the importance of getting youth involved in sport activities so that they can develop lifelong habits that include physical fitness" (p. 516).

Research Into Action: Implementing An Intramural Program In Your Community

The following suggestions and strategies can help your agency implement an intramural program.

1. Mission/Philosophy

The literature on barriers to youth sport participation and high drop-out rates in sports suggests that a more inclusive and diversified approach to youth sports delivery may be effective at attracting and retaining children in sports programs. Intramural sports should complement the physical education children receive in school. All children, regardless of athletic skills should be encouraged to participate in a diverse array of activities that are fun and contribute to lifelong physical activity. Specific goals of an intramural program as outlined by the National Intramural Sports Council of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE 2001) should include:

- Provide an opportunity to participate in sport and physical activities without regard for high-performance skill.
- Provide activities in a safe and professionally supervised environment.
- Nurture healthy competition, enjoyment, fair play and teamwork.
- Establish a student-centered program that considers the needs and interests of all students.
- Enhance social interaction and reduce student conflict.
- Provide opportunity for coed physical activity participation.
- Provide opportunities for students to experience a variety of physical activities that will contribute to an active lifestyle and enhance their leisure time.

2. Integrate with Other Programs that Promote Healthy and Active Living

Intramural programs appear to be more successful when they build upon lessons and skill developments achieved through school physical education classes. It is important to recognize that intramural sports should not replace school physical education, but provide an avenue for students to practice and improve upon the fundamental skills taught in physical education. In addition, the research on changing health behaviors clearly shows that interventions like intramurals are more effective when combined with environmental changes in the school environment (i.e., active living education, role modeling, parent involvement and support) (Nader, Stone, Lytle, Perry, Osganian, Kelder, Webber, Elder, Montgomery, & Feldman, 1999).

3. Program Administration

Although intramural programs are best administered by a trained physical education or recreational specialist, their success appears to be dependent on extensive student and volunteer-parent involvement. Students should have ample opportunities to be involved in the selection of activities, and participate in leadership programs designed to prepare students to assume roles as program coordinators and officials/referees. Volunteer parent involvement is important

because it serves to both facilitate student participation and helps to ensure adherence to important school policies and procedures

2.3 GAME, SET, MATCH: IF YOU BUILD IT AND MAINTAIN IT, THEY WILL COME PLAY TENNIS

Public tennis courts are the lifeblood of a park. It has been proven time and again that if parks continue to build and maintain tennis courts, the community will respond--in droves. In fact, according to the United States Tennis Association (USTA) nearly 70 percent of tennis is played on public courts.

The benefits to the public are astounding

Known as the sport for a lifetime, playing tennis directly impacts a person's health and quality of life. According to the "Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health," higher levels of physical activities lower mortality rates for all ages, decrease the risk of cancer, heart disease and high blood pressure.

The park and recreation staff in Dothan, Ala , knew that if they built it, the community would come. The town recently decided to expand Westgate Tennis Center at the 243-acre Westgate Park and added four tennis courts, two remote bathrooms and two shade shelters constructed to serve the new courts.

With more than 3,000 Dothan citizens using the Tennis Center, Assistant Director of Leisure Services Kim Meeker says, "The people were already here, we just had to respond to the demand." Just in USTA leagues alone there are more than 1,500 players--a 10 percent increase since 2004--big numbers in a city of only 57,000 people.

Dothan's Westgate Tennis Center's extensive programming was recognized in 2001 with the NRPA/USTA's Excellence in Tennis Programming National Gold Award. Currently, Westgate Tennis Center is running ongoing leagues, and is home to the Movie Gallery USTA Women's Pro Classic circuit event each year, where contenders from more than 20 countries battle for a purse of \$75,000. That tournament is one of several national, sectional state, local, adult and junior tournaments hosted by the Westgate Tennis Center throughout the year.

The commitment to tennis is a joint effort by the Dothan Tennis Association (DTA) and the Dothan Leisure Services Department (DES). The effective division of labors between the two has been key to the success. While the DTA provides the volunteers, programs and advocacy, DLS offers staff